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## Invasion of Laos, 1971: Lam Son 719, by Robert D. Sander

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the worldwide domination of American pop culture, while allowing its content to sink lower and lower; the troubled career of U.S. international broadcast; and the Internet and social media.

And yes, she deals also with the problem of U.S. promotion of democracy abroad. To quote from the last sentences of the book: “The premise of this book has been that a significant number, perhaps even a preponderance, of today’s tiny battles are being fought not in the news media but in the mundane realm of popular culture. The wisdom of America is clear and straightforward: political liberty can be sustained only by self-governing individuals and prudently designed institutions. Yet when our fellow human beings look at America through the screen of our entertainment, what they see most darkly is a rejection of tradition, religion, family and every kind of institutional restraint, in favor of unseemly egotism and libertinism. Attracted and repulsed by this image, they might be forgiven for not appreciating the part about self-governance.”

KENNETH D. M. JENSEN



Sander, Robert D. *Invasion of Laos, 1971: Lam Son 719*. Norman: Univ. of Oklahoma Press, 2014. 304pp. \$29.95

“The only chance we have is to initiate bold moves against the enemy,” national security adviser Henry Kissinger confided in 1971. This was his advice to the administration of President Nixon, which sought to end the Vietnam War by creating “peace with honor.” “Bold moves” would include two new strategies. One was resumed bombing of North Vietnam. The second would

be new ground raids into Cambodia and Laos to disrupt the Ho Chi Minh Trail—the network that allowed Hanoi to supply communist forces in the south, and that at its peak even included an oil pipeline from the Chinese border to the environs of Saigon. The raid into Laos, code-named LAM SON 719, is the subject of Robert Sander’s recent book *Invasion of Laos, 1971*.

Despite the term “invasion” in the book’s title, LAM SON 719 was designed as a cross-border raid on the town of Tchepone. It was here communist military supplies were shifted from trucks to porters, bicycles, and pack animals. The town had received attention from American military planners as early as the Kennedy administration. Sander quotes General Westmoreland explaining to General Abrams in March 1968, “I’d like to go to Tchepone, but I haven’t got the tickets.” Westmoreland’s plans called for at least four divisions to undertake the assault. For its part, the government of Saigon had been planning an operation into Laos from at least 1965. In reality, as Sander notes, the United States had been conducting CIA and covert air operations in Laos since the 1950s.

President Nixon’s policies of détente and outreach to China meant a reduction of the chance that expanding the war into “neutral” Laos would trigger Soviet or Chinese response.

Congressional restrictions designed to limit the war meant that American involvement in the 1971 operation would be confined to supporting roles in artillery and fire support. Yet, as Sander points out, this was still a bloody battle for the Americans. American casualties ran high, with over two hundred killed and at least 1,100 injured. Sander, who was a pilot during the battle, observes

that “U.S. Army helicopter crews endured incomparably higher losses during this two-month operation in heavily defended airspace than during any other period of the Vietnam War.”

The overall impact on the Ho Chi Minh Trail was limited but communist forces suffered at least thirteen thousand casualties, and the offensive blunted any North Vietnamese attempts to strike at withdrawing American forces. The withdrawal at the conclusion of the operation was memorialized by journalists who photographed Army of the Republic of Vietnam (ARVN) soldiers hanging on to the skids of returning American helicopters.

The operation’s overall dismal results were not due to a lack of ARVN bravery, Sander argues, but to poor operational planning and politics. Indeed, the ARVN suffered some 7,500 casualties out of the seventeen thousand soldiers committed to the operation. Rather, the ARVN battle plan for LAM SON 719 “was complex, far too complex for a corps commander and staff that had never conducted corps-sized operations.”

In Washington, the Army’s Vice Chief of Staff, General Bruce Palmer, remarked that “only a Patton or a MacArthur would have made such a daring move; an Eisenhower or a Bradley would not have attempted it.” Yet, at the start of 1971, South Vietnam had such an officer: General Tri, the daring corps commander who had led the successful Cambodia offensive. General Tri’s bravado extended to his trademark swagger stick and stylish sunglasses. Tragically, General Tri died in a helicopter crash en route to take command of the stalled Laos offensive.

Sander identified the operation’s relative failure as “the unintended consequences

of a decision to launch a major military operation involving corps from two nations that did not share a common objective.” While President Nixon “hoped to prevent the North Vietnamese from launching an offensive that could endanger, and even delay, withdrawal of American forces remaining in Vietnam,” South Vietnamese president Thiệu’s ultimate “objective was to give South Vietnam more time to prepare to meet the North Vietnamese without direct U.S. military assistance and without sacrificing his best divisions.”

American frustration during the operation was compounded by President Thiệu’s refusal to commit ARVN reserve forces to the battle. Sander suggests that many of these unused ARVN divisions were less than combat ready. Many were hampered by soldiers who spoke regional dialects and had strong ties to their local areas and could not be deployed far from home without fears of desertion. ARVN readiness was affected by another problem on which Sander does not dwell: “flower soldiers.” By the early 1970s, South Vietnam had as many as a hundred thousand “flower soldiers,” soldiers who paid commanders to continue civilian life as normal. In other instances the names of dead soldiers were kept on the muster rolls so their commanders could collect their salaries.

There are apparent parallels between LAM SON 719 and more recent events. It was revealed in November 2014 that the Iraqi Army had fifty thousand “ghost soldiers” who similarly did not exist. Likewise, where President Thiệu saw ARVN elite units first and foremost as a force to crush potential rivals, in Iraq, Prime Minister Maliki had similar views of using military force to suppress Sunni rivals. Thiệu was hesitant

about committing forces to LAM SON 719, and in 2014, when ISIS seized Fallujah, Maliki allowed the problem to fester. In neither case was suppression of a hostile insurgency put above the objective of maintaining a grip on power—much to the frustration of Washington. As Henry Kissinger would later say of LAM SON 719, it was an “operation [that was] conceived in ambivalence and assailed by skepticism, [and] proceeded in confusion.” Today what was then the town of Tchepone lies abandoned, though the lessons of 1971 remain fresh. Sander’s work will likely remain the definitive record of the Laos campaign until such time as archives in Hanoi are made fully available.

JOSEPH HAMMOND



Haddick, Robert. *Fire on the Water: China, America, and the Future of the Pacific*. Annapolis, Md.: Naval Institute Press, 2014. 288pp. \$37.95

Robert Haddick proposes a revised U.S. strategy toward China. He argues—agreeing with recent U.S. national security strategies—that continued U.S. forward presence is the only option that supports the American objectives of “an open international economic system; respect for universal values around the world; and a rules-based international order that promotes peace, security, and opportunity through stronger cooperation.” He articulates a two-front effort to ensure China rises within the existing international structure: positive reinforcement of good behavior combined with significant defense reforms to allow punishment of bad behavior.

Haddick discusses the nature of China’s military modernization and how it

bodes ill for the U.S. ability to punish Chinese transgressions against international order. He believes that current U.S. force posture is inadequate because U.S. air and naval capabilities are vulnerable to Chinese land-, air-, and sea-launched cruise missiles and ballistic missiles. And future U.S. capabilities—the F-35 in particular—have insufficient range to operate from existing bases under the antiaccess umbrella created by these weapons. To counter the tactical and operational challenges these weapons create he advocates the Pentagon develop a new long-range bomber and long-range cruise missiles able to penetrate Chinese airspace and hold critical targets at risk. He also promotes autonomous aerial projectiles based on a 1990s DARPA model to locate and destroy road-mobile missile launchers. He argues convincingly that his acquisition proposals solve the likely tactical and operational problems of a future war with China, but he does not engage with the highly contested literature on the strategic effectiveness of airpower. Without a theory of strategic effectiveness, he fails to make the case that these new capabilities would support his strategy and influence Chinese decision making during crisis or war.

Additional proposals are designed to threaten presumed Chinese fears. These include encouraging America’s regional allies to develop their own antiaccess capabilities on the First Island Chain, improving U.S. Navy blockading capacity, developing irregular warfare capacity among China’s minority populations, and developing antisatellite weaponry.

However, if China continues its policy of “salami slicing,” these weapons and plans will never see battle. By incrementally challenging the existing regional order,